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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Significance of European Elections

Next June, the 198 members of the European Parliament, now selected by the national parliaments from among their own ranks, will be replaced by 410 representatives directly elected in each community country. Thus far, most participants see the first poll--the second is in 1984--as important more because it is an election than because it is "European."

Even so, the domestic significance of the June election will vary a good deal from country to country. In the campaigns, the issues may not be clearly articulated in terms of their impact on or relation to national interests. The special nature of the elections will also allow the participating parties partially to discount the results as a measure of their relative popularity--especially if the turnout is low.

To the skeptics of integration, the elections also lack a "European" reality. They stress that no government will emerge from the elected assembly, and that the powers the assembly will have are more limited than its pretensions. The voting will be for national delegations and, despite support from transnational party confederations, the influence of national parties will predominate. No common electoral system will be in use.

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All true, but irrelevant perhaps over the longer term. The maneuvering among parties and factions will give an indication of how closely European issues even now are linked to politics at home. Moreover, the elections will almost surely force politicians and governments to focus on the development of transnational party groupings, the elaboration of uniform electoral rules and the future role of the parliament.

In what follows we look briefly at the elections for

- their significance as national polls,*
- what they presage about Europe-wide party or coalition-building, and*
- their possible effect on the institutional balance within the community.*

National Referenda

France--More than a contest between government and opposition, the European elections will be fought within each camp--Socialists vs. Communists, and Giscardian centrists vs. Gaullists. If enough voters go to the polls (and abstentions could be heavy), the elections could in the French case be a gauge of relative party popularity inasmuch as proportional representation is being introduced for the first time under the Fifth Republic.

In contrast to the campaigns in other countries (except in Britain), attitudes in France toward the EC as such could play a significant role. A certain community of interests between the Socialists and Giscard's Union for French Democracy may be highlighted, since both are much more "European" than the Communists and Gaullists.

The Socialists, however, will not find it easy to come up with a European platform. Pro-Europeans may be in the majority, but the party harbors many skeptics. (It is largely the French who have made a Europe-wide Socialist platform a dead letter.) EC enlargement, for example, is already a divisive issue--with some politicians fearing that outright endorsement could weaken Socialist support in its traditional stronghold in southwest France, where the farmers fear Spanish competition.

Mitterrand will probably head the Socialist list, and this should add interest to the elections. But it is probably more a sign of the Socialist leader's interest in dampening rivalry among possible successors than of Mitterrand's commitment to, or even understanding of, community issues.

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The intense rivalry among party factions probably assures a scramble for the top quarter of the Socialist list, since these are the only candidates likely to win seats. Added to the factional competition is the desire of some Socialists to include trade unionists and Left Radicals on the list. The latter are poorly placed to pass the five percent threshold themselves but could drain away marginally important votes from the Socialists if they ran independently.

It is important for the Communists not to lose ground to the Socialists, even though "Europe" is traditionally of secondary interest to the Communist electorate. The party will doubtless stress the need for a large delegation to the European Parliament to continue the "fight from within" against supranationalists, big capital, and the collaborating social democrats who would "smother" French independence. However illogical its European positions, the party may mobilize protest votes, especially if unemployment is worse by next June and can be blamed on the government's austerity measures or French membership in a new European monetary arrangement.

The government parties have yet to agree on platforms, personalities, and the number of lists. At one extreme is the possibility of a single list; at the other, as many as three or four--if pro-and anti-marketeers among the Gaullists fail to reconcile differences. The Gaullists, some of whom still want the government to cancel the elections, will try to exchange their agreement to a single list for certain commitments on French policy in the EC. Chirac has even mentioned the possibility of the Gaullists not running at all, perhaps later intending to claim a large number of abstentions as "their" vote.

The European elections are a good opportunity for the UDF to demonstrate electoral cohesion prior to the presidential election in 1981 and to bolster its role as the main support for Giscard's program. Nonetheless, it will have to weigh the advantages of a separate list against the risk of coming in second to the Socialists and thus appearing the weaker partner of some prospective "center-left" coalition.

Whatever the outcome, it is evident that a need to compromise passionately held views on the evolution of Europe is already an important factor in French party politics.

Italy--The strong support for the European elections within the Italian political class reflects the long-standing belief that Europe provides an avenue of escape from national weakness and vulnerability.

Apart from that, however, Italians for months have looked to the elections as an important domestic political event. Changes in the

relative positions of Christian Democrats, Communists, and Socialists would be seized upon by the favored party as significant. If dramatic enough, the elections might even precipitate the next governmental "crisis." For the present they provide the parties which are unprepared for a collapse of the government with an argument for prolonging the existing arrangement.

Since the late 1960s, the Communists have been generally supportive of the EC, reflecting their recognition of its contribution to Italian prosperity and their hope that involvement in EC affairs would help forestall adverse reaction should the party enter the government. The Communists have linked their support of the EC to their broader line favoring a Europe independent of both the US and USSR.

The Communists apparently believe they stand a better chance in the election by running in favor of "Europe" than by stressing contentious domestic issues. But recent signs of Communist vulnerabilities, particularly the party's losses in local elections last spring, have encouraged other Italian politicians to challenge the PCI's credibility in many areas--and its European policy is likely to present an inviting target.

Much of the current polemic against the Communists has focused on their continued ties with Moscow and their retention of such Leninist practices as democratic centralism. The Socialists and Christian Democrats in particular will probably cite those factors to raise doubts about the PCI's commitment to an "independent" Europe. And the discontent currently expressed by some of the PCI's more orthodox supporters may make it more difficult than in the past for the party to deflect such charges. In short, the European contest seems likely to turn on many of the same issues as Italy's last national election--which was essentially a referendum on the PCI's credibility. Still, the election holds as many opportunities as risks for the Party: a strong Communist vote would be viewed as the clearest sign so far that a large portion of the Italian populace accepts PCI professions of autonomy from the Soviets on a major foreign policy issue.

The PCI's longer-term hopes for exercising influence at the European level lie in dialogue and association with the Northern Socialists. While the party would like to induce the French Communists to join in a statement of goals that would preserve an aura of Communist solidarity, respectability will not come from that quarter. Hence the importance of not taking positions in the European campaign that would scare off the German Social Democrats in particular, especially since the PCI may believe that its own relationship to the SPD could eventually be a better balanced one than that of the smaller Italian Socialist Party.

While the Communists prepare assiduously and are likely to be the first off the mark in opening a campaign, the Socialists may have the most at stake. Unless a crisis intervenes before then, the June elections will be the first national test of PSI leader Craxi's new and forcefully autonomist course. The recent polemics between Socialists and Communists could thus be given even greater exposure in the campaign--the two parties projecting competing visions of a socialist Europe. Craxi will seek voter support on the grounds that the PSI will be part of the largest and potentially most influential group in the European Parliament. He naturally hopes that Socialist strength in Strasbourg will eventually accrue to enhanced PSI influence in Rome.

The Christian Democrats, meanwhile, are currently reassessing their relationship with the PCI in a debate characterized by varying degrees of hostility or receptivity to the notion of Communist membership in the government. To a large degree this debate turns on the question of whether the PCI is capable of further democratic evolution. A good Communist showing, based on a strongly pro-European campaign, would strengthen the hand of Christian Democrats who claim the PCI can continue moving in that direction.

Germany--The European elections will be the only national poll before the 1980 legislative elections. Their importance for domestic politics will depend in part on the results of the regional contests that are still to be held between now and June. If the SPD-FDP coalition in Bonn has been weakened, the European elections would have enhanced atmospheric significance. Since the European voting will, in effect, take place on the basis of national lists, the FDP will make use of its total vote and have a good chance to surpass the five percent threshold; it would nevertheless be embarrassed by poor showings in any given Land.

The European campaigns have scarcely got off the ground, and it is too early to know how much interest they will generate. Neither the community as a whole nor the parliament as an institution is controversial in Germany. The opposition has been criticizing Schmidt's promotion of a new EC monetary arrangement, and the CDU-CSU may charge the government with inviting domestic inflation through participation in a scheme that includes less disciplined members.

Inflation could conceivably also become an issue because the SPD's European platform calls for a shorter work week. Socialist emphasis on this point, however, may be difficult because most SPD ministers, including Chancellor Schmidt, will not give the idea much support, except in the context of increased productivity.

Willy Brandt intends to head the SPD list and this may encourage a stronger opposition campaign, since Brandt is a favorite target of the conservatives, who see him as the putative leader of a "dangerous" left-wing European coalition. Ideological strains in the campaign will also get a boost if Franz Josef Strauss decides to run the Bavarian-based CSU in all the Laender. Strauss would presumably make his "fourth party" threat real--and use the European elections as its first test--only if the conservatives had not otherwise shown up well in next spring's regional elections.

UK--Prime Minister Callaghan's decision not to hold national elections this fall increases the likelihood that the European and domestic elections will be close to each other. This could further diminish the electorate's low interest in the European vote and lessen its potential domestic impact. The parties had been somewhat concerned that European elections held substantially later than the national ones might repudiate the party in power.

While the Conservatives' plans for the European elections are far more advanced than Labor's, leaders of both parties have their eyes fixed on Westminster, not Strasbourg.* Even so, campaigning will doubtless pick up well before June, since neither party wants a defeat. At least a minor consideration in Callaghan's reckoning is the thought that European and national elections on the same date would bring more Labor voters to the European poll.

Insofar as the voters take real interest, the European elections in Britain may have a distinctively pro- vs. anti-European cast. The Tories, despite their leaders' current lack of enthusiasm for the community, still have a more pro-Europe reputation than Labor. Moreover, the Labor candidates will be chosen primarily at the local level where grass-roots anti-EC sentiment is strong. Indeed, anti-European candidates may give Labor its best chances in the European election.

The Labor Party will not permit members to sit both in Strasbourg and Westminster, and the Conservatives will strongly discourage a dual mandate.** The UK's delegation to the European Parliament will therefore lack many of the notables it now has.

**The Liberals have virtually no chance under Britain's majority system of winning any seats in Strasbourg.*

***Although it is generally thought that dual mandates will be ruled out when a uniform electoral system has been set for the EC as a whole, double representation is permitted for the first directly elected parliament and perhaps as much as one third of the Strasbourg body will also have seats at home.*

Transnational Effects

Community-wide parties (in reality, loose confederations of parties) will play only a minor role in the June elections. Their day will come if the European Parliament increases its influence over EC affairs and if subsequent campaigns are conducted under uniform voting rules throughout the community. Nevertheless, hopes and fears about transnational party alignments already color the political scene.

The existing party confederations for the most part parallel party groups that were set up within the European Parliament some time ago. The Christian Democrats in Strasbourg (11 parties) are members of the European People's Party; the Socialists (also 11) form the Confederation of Socialist Parties; and the "Liberals and allies" (14 parties) constitute the European Liberals and Democrats.

In April 1978, the British Tories and a number of anti-left-wing parties from within and outside the community organized the European Democratic Union--the latest effort to meld Western Europe's conservative and Christian Democratic forces. While it brings the British together with the German CDU/CSU (already members of the European People's Party), Belgian, Dutch, and Italian Christian Democrats remain opposed to equating Christian Democracy with conservatism. The EDU will not be a significant factor in the June elections; it is, however, a potentially European anti-left force that may split the European People's Party between centrists and conservatives.

The fractioning of center and right-wing groups in the European Parliament has left the Socialists by far the largest group, and they will likely continue roughly to hold the one-third percentage of seats they now have. Socialist strength, however, means less than it might, since neither the British Labor Party nor the French Socialists have any desire to be bound by a European program. Ideological considerations aside, the strongly pro-Europe Germans are suspect to the British and to many of the French. Labor Party rules in fact virtually exclude giving precedence to Socialist "discipline" in Strasbourg.

Nevertheless, Socialist predominance and the weight of Germans is a rallying cry both for the Gaullists who argue against any extension of European Parliament powers and for German conservatives like Franz Josef Strauss, who seems to want to lead a Europe-wide crusade against left-wing "domination" (especially if led by SPD party chief Brandt).

The Communists now constitute a 17-member group in the European Parliament, including ten Italians and four French. Their parties have had no success in agreeing on a European program and remain seriously split over both the usual "Eurocommunist" issues and EC enlargement.

It is too soon to know how a "new politics" of transnational alliances and European party coalitions will develop. In the parliament itself--if the existing groups and parties are a guide--it would seem that a center-left might be the more viable coalition, based on the relatively cohesive Christian Democrat and Socialist groupings. A center-right coalition would require the Christian Democrats to cooperate with a motley collection of three parliamentary groups (Liberals, Gaullists, and Conservatives) including, in addition to the Christian Democrats, some 20 parties.

Speculation along such lines is certainly premature, however, given the way the parliament now works. Indeed, a more meaningful cleavage, especially as the new parliament begins to debate such issues as a uniform electoral law for the next elections and how hard to press for new powers, may be between the pro- and anti-integration forces--between those hoping to force the national governments to concede authority to European institutions and those content to move slowly, or perhaps not at all, towards a greater community influence over the national governments.

In the long run a community which increases its functions over broader areas of day-to-day life seems bound to generate popular interest groups, and direct elections to the European Parliament would be the natural focus for such a development. But what form these constituencies will take and what effect they will have are at this point unpredictable. If states feel challenged by supranational electoral alliances, for example, they may react in ways that will impede integration. Differing philosophies among the member states about the pace and ultimate goals of political unity--kept more or less in check by the "pragmatism" of the EC Council of Ministers--will likely be more fully exposed if pro- and anti-EC parties emerge. Thus not only will European elections cause European issues to spill over into domestic politics, but they may also increase tensions between the member states. Such, it might be said, is the price of democracy. But it does appear that in one way or another the new parliament will fulfill the minimal goal of publicizing EC issues and making community structures and institutions matters of electoral politics.

The Institutional Balance

The European Parliament is not so totally ineffective as it is sometimes portrayed. Its question period opens to scrutiny community policies that otherwise might get scant public attention; the committee system insures adequate attention to important proposals; and, within its limited mandate, the parliament has forced changes in the EC budget. The parliament's most vaunted power--to dismiss the EC Commission--has

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been threatened but never used, in large part because the Commission is usually an ally of parliament in defending the community's supranational cast. (Moreover, the parliament has no say in naming a new Commission.)

Direct elections will not directly add to the parliament's powers. Nevertheless, both opponents and supporters of integration see them as a step towards a more weighty assembly. Much will depend on the caliber of the people elected, their willingness to work hard to take advantage of limited maneuvering space, and their ability to work together rather than seek European "stardom." Ultimately, the parliament's ability to impose a more European dimension on the national interests represented by the Council of Ministers will be a function of the system by which it is elected. The electoral laws being used for the first round may in fact send more nationally-minded delegates to Strasbourg than the present arrangements do.*

There are a number of ways the new parliament could try to gain greater influence short of changing the EC treaties, changes which would have to be ratified by the EC members. It could seek tighter control over community expenditures and a more prominent role in debating Commission proposals. Much of the parliament's effectiveness has been achieved without treaty amendment. But how far it can move into "gray areas" with the member states sensitized to its potential assertiveness is open to question.

Moreover, the parliament itself will have to be careful about the implications of such institutional assertiveness. Even a limited claim to initiate community policies would, for example, usurp the Commission's most important prerogative.** When closely examined, most suggestions for an expanded parliamentary role imply a subtle shift in the community's institutional balance. For this reason, the new parliament, unless it turns out to be a complete dud, will create tensions that will in due course lead to the long over-due debate over the community's "constitution."

**David Marquand has noted, however, that although these members "will display more sensitivity to the European interests of their voters than their nominated predecessors have done,...there need be nothing anti-European in that. American Congressmen have never been slow to promote the interests of their constituents, and in promoting them have helped to knit the Union together." ("Towards a Europe of the Parties," in The Political Quarterly, Vol. 94, No. 4, Oct-Dec 1978, p. 439)*

***Although eroded in practice, the provisions giving the independent Commission the power to propose and the Council of Ministers the right to decide--in some cases by majority vote--gave to the Rome treaties their unique, supranational character. How the elected parliament, with enhanced European "legitimacy," will figure in this "dialogue" is of course a key question.*

That these matters are more than theoretical is evident from Giscard's recent call for a committee of three "wise men" to ponder the institutional questions raised by EC enlargement, the elections, and a new monetary system. Giscard's aim, although ambiguous, is at a minimum to assure that the heads of government address a situation that could get out of hand if the member-states relinquish further control to a community too inefficient to assume its responsibilities.

In sum, the European elections will neither inaugurate the millenium that the most ardent Europeanists hope for nor spell the demise of national sovereignty that is feared in nationalist circles. Along with enlargement and a new monetary system, the elections do make clear, however, that community and European stability will in the future depend a good deal more on meeting challenges thrown up by the dynamics of integration.

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